DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 192 321 CS 205 835

AUTHOR Lemrow, Lynne: Lemrow, Joseph H.
TITLE Uses of Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom: No Apologies--No Regrets.
PUB DATE Feb 80
NOTE 12p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (Kalamazoo, MI, February 14-16, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Advertising: *Comics (Publications): *Expository Writing: Higher Education: *Periodicals: Popular Culture: Reading Interests: Reading Materials: Recreational Reading: Secondary Education: *Teaching Methods: Writing Exercises: *Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

Magazines and comic strips are two readily available cultural artifacts that can be used by expository writing teachers. Magazines are a particularly rich source of referential material for the composition classroom, offering examples of various prose styles and formal structures. One possibility for using magazines in writing classes is a four-part unit on magazine advertising that demonstrates Erving Goffman's views on how advertising reflects and reinforces male dominance and female submissiveness as normative behavior. The unit would include an introduction to Goffman's views, a workshop in which students examined material in Goffman's terms, a prewriting discussion of ways to share conclusions about the material, and the actual writing of expository essays. A unit on comics could discuss ideas such as distinguishing between the complexities of authorial intention and the psychology of reader response, making some attempt to differentiate between the cartoonist's intent and the rhetoric employed to convey it, and employing a standard descriptive vocabulary that accounts for the psychology of comics and the parts of a comic strip. (RL)

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Uses of Popular Culture in the Composition Classroom: No Apologies - No Regrets.

Lynne Lemrow
Joseph H. Lemrow

As we all know by now, the skilled teacher of composition can function well without any textbook at all, and, indeed, rhetoric / readers have come under sever criticism for the often intimidating effects of their models. Yet, supporters of using readers argue convincingly that imitatio is an old, and proven method, and that the texts offer students sources of information and ideas that many enjoy and find useful. This paper discusses the use of a middle way between the rhetoric / reader and using no text at all: the use of contemporary cultural artifacts as motivational devices and as objects of study, analysis, and ultimately, synthesis and judgment in the composition classroom. The authors make no apologies for using popular culture because it is, in the main, the culture of the student population. Students' easy familiarity with pop culture provides the kind of built-in motivational factor difficult to find in other tools. If "write what you know about" is still a valid caution, then popular culture as a content focus for composition offers the student a limitless source of fresh insights on familiar material especially useful for the learning and practice of expository writing. We would like to discuss the uses we make of two readily available cultural artifacts: magazines and comic strips.

Magazines are a particularly rich source of referential material for the composition classroom. The most obvious advantage is the uniqueness of the tool as a text: it is student-chosen, student-owned; almost any magazine or

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newspaper will do, so a high interest factor is built-in. The editorial content of magazines (editorials, letters, articles) offers examples of various prose styles, of formal structures, and sometimes even of "bad" (imprecise, incoherent, illogical) writing in the letters column. Editorial content can be used not only for modeling, but also for the polishing (or teaching) of skills such as skimming and precis writing. We want to focus, however, on the use of that other ingredient of mass-circulation magazines, the advertisements, for which we have devised a unit that works in practice as well as it does in theory. By completing this unit, students ought to have learned, in addition to certain composition skills, the social science technique of content analysis, the concept of "latent" media messages, and a system for decoding them. They finally will write a judgmental essay, based on tangible evidence, that demands the use of logical and theoretical skills such as classification, description, analysis, inductive reasoning, and the weighing of evidence.

We have developed a four-part structure for this magazine unit. Part one is a presentation of the ideas of Erving Goffman,[1] part two is a hands-on workshop whereby students examine and analyze material in Goffman's terms, part three is a pre-writing discussion of possible ways to share conclusions about the material in essay form, and part four, the actual writing of the expository essay.

Erving Goffman, by his concept of gender advertising, seeks to demonstrate how advertising reflects and reinforces male dominance and female submissiveness as normative behavior. We select several of Goffman's categories for analyzing advertising, and illustrate each from a collection of contemporary

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[1]Erving Goffman, Gender Advertising, (NY: Harper & Row), 1976.

advertisements culled from magazines. We have found the categories discussed invariably introduce students to new and important ways of "seeing" mass media, especially advertisements. Among those categories we discuss are:

1. Relative size: which of several figures is larger, or in a higher position physically,
2. Touch: which figure grasps; which touches gently,
3. Self-touch: which figure touches self; manner of touch; placement of touch,
4. Executive action: which figure, in a group, directs, points, or otherwise plays the executive,
5. The family: relative size and position of figures; age and sex and position of children, and
6. Mothers and daughters; fathers and sons: which adults are pictured as being similar to children in position and/or appearance.

We explain that our purpose is to determine how ads depict persons in each category according to sex. Our examples illustrate Goffman's conclusions, namely that a strict division along sex lines exists for each category: men are (statistically) larger, taller, positioned above; men grasp, women touch lightly; women touch their faces and gently; men do not touch themselves; men perform the executive action; families consist of father, mother, son, and daughter, in that order of relative size and position; mothers tend to take on childlike qualities when pictured with daughters; fathers remain mature and adult.

We further introduce and use the terms overt, or manifest, and latent as they apply to media message. The overt message of a detergent advertisement, for example, is "Buy brand X." The latent messages might include: live in this kind of house; dress this way; have this kind of family; and perform this task with this attitude if you are a woman. Students need little help decoding the latent messages of ads which illustrate Goffman's categories: males when they appear in these categories, are depicted as characteristically

dominant, and women appear subservient or childlike.

Although these six categories offer plenty of material to work with, we usually bring forward another important Goffman concept, that of subservient postures. Goffman's research found that most subservient postures are assumed by females, and therefore most examples are of females, but we do look for male figures in these postures to point out how un-natural they appear in contrast to how "natural" the females seem in the same postures. We usually cite the following postures:

1. Lying down,
2. Bashful knee-bend,
3. The big smile,
4. Puckishness (of face and/or body)
5. Canting (lowering of head or shoulder relative to the viewer),
6. Withdrawal (eye-aversion, focusing away from the camera lens),
7. Disengagement (full or partial covering, especially of the face), and
8. Mock assualt (group games such as snow or surf frolic; who is "assaulting" whom and therefore asserting physical dominance must be noted).

When we finish the discussion/illustration, we ask students to devise a method which would reveal whether or not a particular magazine (or other medium) printed sexist ads, to what extent, and how we can be sure we know what a sexist ad is. It is not long before students tell us that Goffman has given us specific items to look for to prove sexism in ads; they realize that they now have a definition for sexist advertising. With little prodding, students proceed to formulate a description of the technique of content analysis, best defined by Bernard Berelson as a "research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content

of communication."[2] They concluded that one must choose a medium (e.g., magazines), decide precisely what aspect of the medium to analyze (e.g., full-page, full-color ads), describe and define according to predetermined standards what one will look for (e.g., Goffman's postures), and, finally, count. Students realize that when the numbers are in, one can draw convincing conclusions about the latent content of media by careful content analysis of the mainfest content.

The students task after this lecture/discussion on Goffman, media messages, and content analysis, is to examine the mass-circulation magazine of his/her coice, do a content analysis of the full-page, full-color ads in terms of Goffman's categories and/or postures, and, finally, to formulate a statement about the nature of the advertising in their magazine. Since this statement will become the thesis of their essay, we spend some time working with individual students until all the statements are precise yet comprehensive enough to suggest the scope of the entire essay. Good thesis statements might run something like this: "A majority of the advertisements in the May 1980 issue of Good Housekeeping feature women in submissive postures"; or, "Surprisingly, fewer than half the women in full-page advertisements in the April 1980 issue of McCall's are in submissive postures"; or, "Men in the February 1980 issue of Time are pictured in dominant postures twice as many times as women."

The third part of the unit is pre-writing discussion which focuses on what techniques will be necessary to develop the thesis. We remind students that an introductory section on media and advertising in general is a good way to bring the reader to the thesis. The students usually tell us that the

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[2]Bernard Berelson, Content Analysis in Communication Research (NY: Free Press, 1952), p. 18.

next step ought to be to explain to the reader the entire process by which the conclusion was reached: the division of the whole material (the magazine) into component parts (editorial content, ads, etc.), the choice of a part to analyze, and the classification of members of that part according to their relationship to pre-determined criteria (Goffman's theories). This part of the unit stresses traditional rhetorical skills of process description, classification, and division.

We then ask students what might logically follow this description of method and they quickly realize that it is a presentation of results of analysis. We press until they add that a detailed description of one or two, possibly more, of the best examples of their thesis will make the presentation more vivid and, one hopes, more convincing. We encourage students to consider various possibilities for ending the essay: value judgments about the nature of mass media and advertising, theorizing about the effects of media, or about the value of gathering empirical data before drawing conclusions. We prefer that students proceed to write the essay in class in a workshop atmosphere.

We create in this unit a tight but inherently logical structure which is especially helpful to the beginning composition student whose major problem is often lack or organizational skills. The classical structure this assignment teaches is valuable also because it is very portable: the student can use it at once in any and every other college course as well as use it as a model for report-writing on the job. Yet the student remains in control of the content of the essay, chooses the tone, selects the examples, draws the conclusions. This project is not only lively and contemporary, but it also lends itself to the learning of several important thinking/writing skills. The

students have hands-on experience in gathering data in a high-interest field; they learn techniques for data analysis which reinforce the value of basing critical judgment upon empirical evidence, rather than on uninformed opinion. No defense need be given for an additional result of this assignment: increasing student awareness of latent media messages.

A second way to generate analytic writing using popular culture materials is through what we have come to call the comic mode, or comic analysis, paper. Like the earlier essay applying Goffman's categories to magazine advertisements, the comic mode essay, because it utilizes comic strips, exploits an established popular medium about which a great deal of student interest already exists; it is unnecessary to expend vast energies motivating students.

What does become necessary in shaping and channeling often disparate student responses to the comic is a comprehensive method that provides students with both the descriptive vocabulary for their own ideas and valuations, and a clear rhetorical structure, or structures, to assist them in organizing their responses. We have found that a unit on the comic works well if it utilizes daily and Sunday comic strips and covers several of the following steps: 1) tries to distinguish between the complexities of authorial intention and the psychology of reader response; 2) makes some attempt at differentiating between the cartoonist's intent and the rhetoric employed to convey it; and, 3) employs a standard descriptive vocabulary that accounts for the psychology of comics, as well as a set of terms to describe the parts of a comic strip.

The confusion which results from attempting to isolate authorial intent in a piece of literature usually does not occur when students evaluate comic strips. We have, therefore, found it helpful to discuss the commonly accepted modern explanations of the comic offered by Nietzche, Freud, and Bergson. Briefly, and simplistically, Nietzche posited that the source of the comic lay in man's need to achieve superiority over his fellow man. Freud argued

cruelty was an essential ingredient of the comic. And Bergson theorized that automatic behavior, the reduction of the human to automaton status, was the causal element in comic situations. Nietzche and Freud's focus is on the psychology of our response to the comic and helps explain the momentary exhilaration frequently vented in laughter when an observing intelligence perceives incongruity in a comic situation. They argue it is our sense of superiority, our confidence, that separates us from the butts and gulls cruelly exploited and duped in many comic scenes. Bergson's automaton is closer to the literary notion of stereotyping associated with characterization in comedies, but Bergson goes a bit further. Bergson posits that the reductive process by which a complex psychological entity is presented by one, or a few, mechanical traits, must necessarily evoke a comic response, for in becoming mechanical, man loses individuality and becomes a predictable machine. While these modern theorists often fascinate composition teachers, and may appeal to many students, we have found, however, that a less speculative and more practical method of approach to the comic is sometimes in order when beginning the unit on the comic.

Since students possess a wealth of ideas about comic materials, and since interest is created and motivation tapped, one should start the unit by culling from students those incidents, stand-up comics, jokes, and comic strips they consider successful, either because they have a high entertainment value, or because they possess content that makes a significant statement. Incidents, anecdotes, comic strips, and comedians, as they are narrated and described by students, are usually generously elaborated during class discussions. It is not long before students begin to group, categorize, or classify the raw material offered by their classmates. At this point, it is crucial to generate a great deal of student self and peer evaluation; after all, it will be the students who must be able to evaluate a comic, judge the ideas of their peers,

classify values, acquire a descriptive vocabulary, and write an essay generated by all of these processes.

The comic elements students most often suggested during class discussions were exaggeration, contrast, surprise, and tension. The first three concern the cartoonist's manner of presentation; the last concerns the students' attempt to define the complex nature of their response, but it is, unfortunately, an ambiguous term. Does tension describe conflicting and unresolved intellectual perception, emotional responses to stimuli, or a conflation of intellectual and emotional reactions to the content of the comic strip? Exaggeration, contrast, and surprise are somewhat easier to define, perhaps because their focus is on the mechanics of comic strip presentation, and suggest caricature, juxtaposition, irony, and the unexpected punch line.

In discussing the mechanics of comic strip presentation, two literary terms offer some assistance: narration and metaphor. Most multiple frame cartoons are structured upon simple plot lines and possess an exposition, complication, and climax. Frequently, the characters in comic strips may ostensibly be children, or even animals, but in many such cases, the child, or animal, presented is actually possessed of insights properly belonging to adults. When this sort of simplified symboling occurs, the characterizations are read analogously, or metaphorically; they are not what they literally, or visually, appear to be. The creations populating Charles Schultz's Peanuts come readily to mind.

After descriptive terms generated in class discussion have been identified, developed, and applied to comic strips, students may require in-class lab work. An instructor may choose to distribute xerographic copies of several comics containing clear examples of stereotypic behavior, cruelty, exaggeration, or juxtaposition, and allow students to discover and discuss these examples under the supervision of the instructor/guide. Students can then analyze the comic materials they have culled from the daily and Sunday papers, magazines, or

joke books in order to discover similar comic circumstances. The instructor must remain flexible when guiding student discoverers through their explorations of comic strips, for where student A unearths cruelty, student B, following a different map, finds superiority. Usually a full, one-half, class session is required before students feel comfortable with their, by now, large set of descriptive terms — cruelty, superiority, automatic behavior, caricature, exaggeration, surprise, juxtaposition, irony, satire, incongruity, — and the majority feel confident about their analytic and interpretive abilities.

The next essential step deals with ways to develop, organize, and structure student responses to the comic materials selected, but before suggesting any formal rehtorical models, some of the compositional skills tapped by this assignment need to be noted. Basic descriptive techniques, such as enumerating a frame's details according to their horizontal, vertical, or circular patterns, are familiar to most students and may be used to focus attention on crucial elements in a developing comic strip. Moreover, since most multiple-frame comics are narrative, students' skills in organizing sequentially, chronologically, and/or causally, may also be employed. Process description, the reduction of a gull or a butt to absurdity, may also be used. But, by and large, most students like to classify, compare, and contrast characters and incidents. Students have a plethora of possible options when deciding how to develop the comic mode essay. Description, narration, process analysis, classification, comparison and contrast, and definition might be used, whether singly, or in combination with one another. So numerous are the combinations, and so wide the student's range of texts (comic strips), that most compositions differ considerably from one another, even if the comic unit is inserted into a traditional, rhetoric-oriented composition program.

We offer the following suggestions for developing an expository essay whose subject is comic strips. First, students will have so many ideas, they

will need a form, a structure, into which they can put them. An introductory paragraph might cover necessary definitions of essential terms, provide background information on the history, scope, or function of comic strips, or discuss the significance of humor as a human phenomenon. A discussion of the roles played by various characters in a syndicated strip may also get the essay started. Depending on the starting point selected, the body may stress the innovations of a recent comic writer, a Gary Trudeau, for example, or the corrective, or entertaining purposes behind most comics. Students given to psychological, or philosophical, speculation may discuss the complexities of reader response to the comic, or attempt applying the theories of Nietzche, Freud, and Bergson to contemporary instances of the comic. Students are encouraged to use specific strips as reference foci. In summary paragraphs, students can re-iterate discoveries, relate the selected material to the contemporary American scene, or speculate about the function of humor.

Both these units ask students to use artifacts of popular culture as the content of well-structured essays. We have found that student interest in this content is extraordinarily high and that this enthusiasm invariably motivates them to write thoughtfully, precisely, and with a confidence born of a solid familiarity with the subject matter.